

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

'8 Tens' festival, Night 'B': Tight, terrific and firing on all cylinders



BY JANA MARCUS January 21, 2026

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Actors' Theatre delivers a particularly tight and engaging Night "B" in its 30th anniversary "8 Tens @ 8" Short Play Festival. Eight short plays move briskly across styles and settings, unified by strong performances and assured direction. A confident, crowd-pleasing evening that showcases the festival at its best.

If [Night "A"](#) of Santa Cruz County Actors' Theatre's "8 Tens @ 8" Short Play Festival felt like a joyful reintroduction to the pleasures of short-form theater, Night "B" came in even sharper, more cohesive, and confidently on its game. The sold-out opening-night crowd buzzed with the same enthusiasm as "A" Night, but this lineup felt especially polished, with strong acting and thoughtful direction across all eight plays.

Night "B" whisks the audience through an impressive range of settings, from icy polar landscapes to suburban front yards to the inner workings of Disneyland. What unites these wildly different worlds is the level of performance. Across the board, the actors were focused, expressive and fully committed, making the most of the 10-minute format and proving just how much storytelling can be packed into a short span of time.

If you go

Who: Santa Cruz County Actors' Theatre
What: "8 Tens @ 8" Short Play Festival
When: Through Feb. 15; Thursday to Sunday at 8 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday matinees at 2 p.m.
Where: 1001 Center St., Santa Cruz
Tickets:

santacruzactorstheatre.org/tickets

The evening opens with "The Last Continent" by Ken Henry, directed by Andrew Davids. The play moves fluidly between two timelines, beginning with two explorers at the North Pole, played with strength and ease by Andrew Davids and Gino Danna. Their rapport anchors the piece, allowing the shifts in time to feel seamless. The story then pivots to an elderly man, portrayed with warmth by Marcus Cato, confiding in his pastor, played with quiet compassion by Jennifer Galvin. The result is a poignant reflection on aging, adventure and the human desire to keep reaching for one last great experience.

"The Tea Test," by Seth Freeman, directed by Gail T. Borkowski, follows two friends as they debate the proper way to prepare tea with milk. Tara McMilin and Linda Gunther handle the escalating tension well. What begins as polite discourse evolves into something far more unsettling, and both actors navigate the tonal shift with precision.

The mood turns more serious with "Blue Bag" by John Molina, directed by Christopher Peak. Emerson Kapture gives a restrained, intense performance as a soldier guarding a border in a war-torn region, while Larissa Farias brings quiet resolve to the woman attempting to cross with her blue bag. The direction is purposeful, building tension steadily toward a breaking point.

NIGHT "A" COVERAGE

'8 Tens @ 8' Short Play Festival turns 30 and still moves fast



Act 1 closes with "Stephen Hawking's Train" by Mike Byham, directed by Cathy D. Warner. Ward Willats is delightful as a confident time traveler attempting to convince a skeptical fellow passenger, played with dry humor by Chad Davies, that he truly is from the future. Their chemistry and comic timing are spot-on, and the addition of moving video behind them enhances the sense of motion and travel without overwhelming the performances. The play's clever twist leaves the audience smiling at intermission.



"Code A" by Mary Hayakawa, with Emerson Kapture and Scott Kravitz. Credit: Davis Banta / Right Hand Creative

Act 2 opens with the night's biggest crowd-pleaser, "Code A" by Mary Hayakawa, directed by Gerry Geringer. Emerson Kapture returns in a completely different register as a Haunted Mansion employee at Disneyland, pitching a bold new attraction to her boss, played with authoritative comic flair by Scott Kravitz. The rapid-fire dialogue is delivered with impeccable timing and energy, making this a laugh-out-loud favorite that fully earns its enthusiastic audience response.

"Line Cooks Like Baby Birds" by Maggie Cregan, directed by Peter Gelbum, slows things down just enough to let subtext do the heavy lifting. Bernadette Glenn and Marcus Cato play a married couple engaged in bickering dinner conversation that simmers into a bigger reveal. Both actors give nuanced performances, allowing the audience to read between the lines.

Comedy returns with "Scared Trust" by Andy Waddell, directed by Jim Schultz. Tara McMilin and Chad Davies offer lively, well-matched performances, exploring issues of marriage and trust through witty exchanges and sharp timing. Their relaxed chemistry keeps the piece buoyant and engaging.

The evening concludes with "Pelusa" by Alan Bower, directed by Susan McKay. Two suburban neighbors face off in their adjacent yards, locked in a battle of polite hostility. Actors Ward Willats and Tom Boyle lean fully into the absurd escalation, delivering spirited performances that bring the festival to a strong, satisfying close.



"Pelusa" by Eric Alan Bower with Tom Boyle and Ward Willats. Credit: Davis Banta / Right Hand Creative

Night "B" stands out for its consistency, with every play marked by confident acting and clear direction. Compared to Night "A," which felt varied in its pacing, the plays in Night "B" flow more evenly, delivering a tighter and more unified experience. Together, Nights "A" and "B" give audiences the rare pleasure of seeing many voices, styles, and stories throughout the two-night festival, all fueled by local talent and a shared love of the stage.

Thirty years in, "8 Tens @ 8" remains a testament to the vision of its founder, Wilma Marcus Chandler, and to a Santa Cruz theater community that continues to show up, take risks and tell stories together. What began as a bold experiment has become a beloved tradition, still inviting audiences to laugh, reflect, and rediscover the simple joy of live theater, 10 minutes at a time.

If you find yourself wanting even more short-play goodness, the festival continues with "Best of the Rest," opening Feb. 27, featuring eight additional plays as stage readings that did not make the main lineup. Given this year's offerings, odds are good that there might be a few gems still waiting in the wings.